

Collecting and Reporting Quality Data

*A best practices guide for completing the
Vermont Department of Education
core data collections.*

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 - Burlington Supervisory District, Superintendent Lyman Amsden
 - Essex North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Daniel French
 - Franklin Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Marilyn Grunewald
 - Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, Superintendent Mary Sherrer
 - Lamoille North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Terry Bailey
 - Lamoille South Supervisory Union, Superintendent Alice Angney
 - Orleans-Essex North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Rodman Weston, Jr.
 - Rutland City Supervisory District, Superintendent Mary Moran
 - Rutland South Supervisory Union, Superintendent Walter Goetz
 - Rutland Windsor Supervisory Union, Superintendent Frank Perotti, Jr.
 - South Burlington Supervisory District, Superintendent Gail Durckel
 - Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, Superintendent Wesley Knapp
 - Springfield Supervisory District, Superintendent Rose Marie Rooth
 - Washington Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Robbe Brook
 - Windham Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Cheryl Ruth
 - Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union (Hartland), Superintendent Judy Callens
 - Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union (Windsor), Superintendent Brenda Needham

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Overview



Background

In August 2004, the Vermont Department of Education (DOE) published a Request for Proposals (RFP) to “Develop and Implement Guidelines for Improving Data Use and Reporting Capacity at Vermont Department of Education Data Providers.” The stated goal of the proposed project was to provide Vermont schools, school districts, and supervisory unions with accessible information to assist them in satisfying data reporting requirements with an ultimate goal to boost the efficiency of the data collection process and, consequently, improve the DOE’s ability to meet federal reporting requirements. The expected product was a best practices guide with stand-alone sections that can be used by school administrators and their staff, school district IT personnel, and vendors of student information software.

In November 2004, Marucco, Stoddard, Ferenbach & Walsh, Inc. (MSF&W) entered into a contractual agreement with the Vermont DOE as the winning vendor for the RFP. In the process of developing this best practices guide, MSF&W staff, in tandem with Vermont DOE staff, visited supervisory unions and districts in Vermont, representing a mix of characteristics such as size, geographic distributions, number of member districts and various technical factors. With one exception, the team spent two days at each supervisory union.

The visits took place between March 7 and April 8, 2005. The project team met with SU and school staff, including administrators, business managers, principals, registrars, secretaries, technology support staff, and others who are involved with the collection, data entry and verification of education data that are sent to the State, or the support of the computer systems used in these processes. The following supervisory unions participated in the site visits:

- Burlington Supervisory District, Superintendent Lyman Amsden
- Franklin Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Marilyn Grunewald
- Orleans-Essex North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Rodman Weston, Jr.
- Rutland Windsor Supervisory Union, Superintendent Frank Perotti, Jr.
- Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, Superintendent Wesley Knapp
- Washington Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Robbe Brook


During these visits, the team reviewed how data are collected and reported, explored problems that SUs and schools may be experiencing and assessed the SUs’ and districts’ ability to provide complete and accurate data required by the DOE. These visits included the following assessments as defined in the RFP:

- An assessment of the existing experience or expertise in word processing, spreadsheets, databases, records management, email, student information systems, and Internet access.

- An assessment of current records management systems at each level. This assessment evaluated adequacy, and determined options for enhancement and improvements that could promote and support integrated data sharing and communications. This assessment included the data elements collected as well as the means for storing and accessing data.
- An evaluation of potential areas for capacity building for schools, school districts, and supervisory unions, such as hiring an IT technician with experience in data administration.
- An evaluation of equipment dedicated to data collection and reporting and the cost of this equipment, including computers, servers, modems, CD ROMs, CDRWs, printers, and fax machines.
- An investigation of network connectivity (phone lines, T1, T3, DSL, fiber-optics, wireless) and associated costs.
- An examination of software applications and operating systems, including software name, version, and general specifications, license information, service contracts, and cost.
- A limited evaluation of the procedures for collecting and reporting fiscal data along with an assessment of the cost of collecting fiscal data at the school level.
- A description of the communication chain between entities within the Supervisory Union regarding data and the DOE.
- A determination of the schools', districts', and SUs' opinions about inefficiencies with data reporting procedures both within the SU and between the SU and DOE.
- An assessment of the staff and training requirements to resolve problems in data reporting.

Following the completion of the site visits, the project team developed a statewide, Web-based survey containing a subset of the questions asked during the site visits. All SUs who did not participate in the site visits were invited to complete this survey during the month of June. The following ten SUs completed the surveys:

- Addison Rutland Supervisory Union, Superintendent Ron Ryan
- Essex North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Daniel French
- Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, Superintendent Mary Sherrer
- Lamoille North Supervisory Union, Superintendent Terry Bailey
- Rutland City Supervisory District, Superintendent Mary Moran
- Rutland South Supervisory Union, Superintendent Walter Goetz
- South Burlington Supervisory District, Superintendent Gail Durckel
- Windham Central Supervisory Union, Superintendent Cheryl Ruth
- Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union (Hartland), Superintendent Judy Callens
- Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union (Windsor), Superintendent Brenda Needham



Finally, phone interviews were conducted with staff from the following SUs:

- Lamoille South Supervisory Union, Superintendent Alice Angney
- Springfield Supervisory District, Superintendent Rose Marie Rooth

Altogether, eighteen supervisory unions or districts provided input to this project, representing thirty percent of the sixty supervisory unions and districts in the State.

Summary of Major Findings

The site visits, survey and research described above provided the project team with a wealth of observations and findings regarding the State data collections. Below are a few major findings that are especially pertinent to the best practices found in this Guide.

Local SU and school staff work hard and want to report data correctly. The State data collections require a significant amount of time and effort to complete, often at times of the school year when other time-consuming events may occur. In spite of these challenges, we found that local staff generally work hard to complete the various data collections and seem to be conscientious about completing them correctly and on time.

It has been difficult for SUs and schools to keep up with the increased amount of time and effort required to complete the State data collections.


The work required to complete the State data collections has increased significantly in recent years. Consequently, it has been a challenge for SUs and schools to keep up with this increase. Procedures, staffing levels and software that were adequate in the past to meet these demands are often no longer adequate. As a result, SUs and schools need to reassess the way in which they satisfy their State reporting requirements in each of these areas.

The dates that various data collections are distributed and are due often create "crunch times" at schools and SUs. The various State data collections are conducted at different times throughout the school year. Because of when some of these are done, certain times of the year become especially hectic for school and SU staff.

"In spite of challenges, we found that local staff generally work hard to complete the various data collections and seem to be conscientious about completing them correctly and on time."

Many local staff regard the State data collections as add-ons to their job responsibilities. Simply put, completing these data collections is not viewed as a part of their jobs. Rather, they tend to make a distinction between the work required to complete the data collections and their "real job". A more appropriate view is to accept the State data collections as a normal part of SU and school staff's job assignments and give these tasks the attention and priority they require.

Technology availability is not an issue. The majority of SUs and schools have technology available to them. A very high percentage of locations have Internet connectivity, usually via some sort of broadband access. Most locations have local area networks (LANs), and often wide area networks (WANs). Most schools and SUs also use an office productivity suite, such as Office, and are usually using a fairly current release of both their office productivity software and operating systems.



A potential challenge for some SUs and schools is the fact that many DOE data collections use Microsoft Access to run the data collection software. This requires districts that use Macintosh to have a Windows-based PC or emulation software to run these applications. However, every SU and school visited had at least one PC for this purpose, and no SU visited or surveyed described this as a barrier to completing the data collections.

Local software is usually not well-suited for completing the data collections. The overwhelming majority of SUs and schools in Vermont use commercial student information system software and school accounting system software. While these systems tend to collect the information required for the data collections, they do not necessarily lend themselves to reporting that information to the State in an efficient manner. Data are almost always entered manually into the State data collections instead of imported, and often done so using printed reports that do not present the data in the same format as the data entry screens.

Procedures and protocols for collecting and reporting data are seldom documented. Many of the schools surveyed and visited had some sort of documentation addressing how to administer student data in the local student information system, and some SUs have documented at least a portion of their business office practices. However, these documented procedures are often incomplete and outdated. Further, there seem to be very few locations where there are written procedures for how to properly collect, prepare and report data to the State. SUs and schools often find it difficult to keep their documented procedures current with changes that involve the State data collections.



The Purpose of this Guide

This Guide is not about what hardware or software to buy. Rather, its intent is to assist the reader in two areas: collecting and reporting accurate data, and doing so in as efficient a manner as possible. To do that, this Guide will provide observed best practices that impact the quality and efficiency of the State's core data collections for SUs and schools. It will do this in terms of general, overarching best practices, and with best practices that are related to specific data collections. It will also address the process of selecting software packages and features to look for when doing so.

Data Quality

One of the most oft-repeated quotes concerning data quality comes from a book published in 1929 by Josiah Charles Stamp, an English economist and financier. In his book, *Some Economic Factors in Modern Life*, Stamp writes:


"The individual source of the statistics may easily be the weakest link. Harold Cox tells a story of his life as a young man in India. He quoted some statistics to a Judge, an Englishman, and a very good fellow. His friend said... The Government are very keen on amassing statistics — they collect them, add them, raise them to the n th power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams. But what you must never forget is that every one of those figures comes in the first instance from the [village watchman], who just puts down what he... pleases." Josiah Stamp, *Some Economic Factors in Modern Life*, pp. 258–59 (1929).

It seems some things never change. Over 75 years since Stamp recorded those words, The Government is still "very keen on amassing statistics." And, just as it was then, the validity of anything we choose to do with those statistics still depends on the individual source of the data – the village watchman who puts down what he or she pleases.

This Guide is intended to help SUs and schools more accurately report data to the State; to help today's village watchmen and women— secretaries, registrars, business managers and administrative assistants – provide accurate, reliable data for the DOE's core data collections.

Efficiency

The State DOE makes many "requests" for data to SUs and schools. While every one of the State data collections has valid underlying requirements, they still place a strain on the time, personnel and monetary resources of SUs and schools. It becomes important, then, that SUs and schools complete these data collections in the most efficient manner possible.



One way to improve efficiency is to utilize computer-based automation of tasks. This Guide should help you determine where automation can assist you as well as help you choose the appropriate technology. If there's a way to do something quicker and easier using the right technology, let's do it.

Automation, however, is not a guarantee to achieving efficiency. Consider the following quote from a fairly well-known technology guru:

"The first rule of any technology used in a business is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency. The second is that automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency." Bill Gates, Chairman of the Board and Chief Software Architect, Microsoft Corporation.

Hopefully, you will find the best practices described in this guide to be useful in crafting an efficient operation for completing the State data collections, utilizing the appropriate technology to magnify that efficiency. And, hopefully, that same efficiency will spill over into other areas of technology and data analysis in your supervisory union, district or school.

The Role of the Vermont Department of Education

The Vermont Department of Education bears many responsibilities with regard to the data collections, including the following:

"The DOE understands that these data collections require considerable effort on the part of SUs and schools to complete accurately. Accordingly, it is their responsibility to ensure that the only data being collected are those that are actually required, and that those requirements are valid and current."

Planning and coordination

The DOE has an obligation to be aware of and prepare for changes in federal and state data reporting requirements. With new reporting requirements in mind, it is the DOE's responsibility to develop the structure and procedures necessary to meet these requirements efficiently. Further, the DOE should always strive to minimize the impact of data reporting requirements on schools by communicating across program areas in the department about data collections and sharing data when possible.

Regularly review data collections and requirements

The DOE understands that these data collections require considerable effort on the part of SUs and schools to complete accurately. Accordingly, it is their responsibility to ensure that the only data being collected are those that are actually required, and that those requirements are valid and current.

Communicate to the SUs and schools in a timely manner

It is the responsibility of the DOE to communicate with the SUs and schools pertinent information regarding the State data collections. This includes background information regarding why data are collected or why they are collected at a certain time of the year. It also includes notifications of any changes in the way data are collected or reported, with those notifications being made well enough in advance to provide SUs and schools adequate time to prepare for them.

Help desk support

Support for the State data collections must be made available in two areas: technical assistance with the collection instruments and functional or program assistance with how to complete the collections.



Provide data requirements to vendors

While the DOE does not recommend specific software solutions, they will provide assistance to vendors who desire to customize their software products to meet the unique requirements of Vermont SUs and schools.

Make collected data available to SUs and schools

Once data are collected, they will be made available to SUs and schools via various postings, such as the DOE Website and, for Vermont Data Consortium members, the Vermont Data Consortium's data warehouse.

The Role of the Supervisory Union

Supervisory unions, as “administrative, planning and educational service units”, have the potential to provide various types of services for the benefit of their member districts (16 VSA § 261). When viewed in the context of the various activities and responsibilities involved in completing the State data collections, the role of the SU holds the potential to greatly assist member districts and to enhance both the processes of completing these data collections and the quality of the data collected.

An ideal role for the SU would be to coordinate all aspects of its member districts’ technology. Technology planning, procurement, support and management are all aspects that can be accomplished more effectively at a centralized SU level as opposed to disparate, uncoordinated efforts at the school district level.

“A centralized technology planning function that looks at technology from a holistic, SU-wide perspective is invaluable in providing the type of planning that individual school districts may not have the time, finances, or skill set to provide on their own.”

Planning

Implementing technology of any kind requires planning and coordination. There are countless stories of organizations selecting solutions based on a vendor’s presentation, only to find out (too late) that those solutions do not provide functionality that proves to be vital to the organization. Examples include a payroll system that will not “talk to” the accounting system, scheduling systems that don’t quite support the type of schedules the buyer uses, or student information systems that can’t provide the data requested by the State, or provide it in the required format. In an SU, you may end up with each member district using a different student information system, possibly on different hardware platforms.

A centralized technology planning function that looks at technology from a holistic, SU-wide, perspective is invaluable in providing the type of planning that individual school districts may not have the time, finances, or skill set to provide on their own. In such a scenario, school districts should not lose control of their technology environment, but they should be “team players” with the rest of the SU. An SU with consistent technology throughout – hardware, operating systems, network and application software – becomes better suited to function efficiently in processing data and providing technical support, and is better able to use its combined mass to maximize its buying power.



Procurement

As centralized procurement agents, SUs represent the best choice for selecting and purchasing technology for their member districts. It is certainly more effective for one entity to perform the needs assessment, request for quotes, product evaluation and final purchasing to procure new technology and professional services than for multiple entities to perform those tasks independently. As already mentioned, the combined force of all of the member districts in an SU increases the collective buying power of the group. And, as also mentioned, procurement of a technology solution based on a solid planning process helps to ensure that the proper solution is chosen.

Technology support

It takes a considerable breadth of technical support to keep technology running, accessible, and utilized to its maximum potential. Unfortunately, most schools and smaller school districts cannot afford to hire technical personnel with the skills required to support the variety of technologies – hardware, operating systems, network, office productivity and application software – used in their organizations.

Further, it would not be economical to hire and train individuals for technology support if a single school or school district could not keep that person busy full-time. Technology support is often an “as needed” commodity. And, when it’s needed, it’s usually needed *now*. Hiring a person to be available whenever necessary would be expensive for a single district or school. An SU could provide the appropriate number of support staff for all member districts more efficiently than each district could individually. The SU would be responsible for hiring and training the appropriate staff or outsourcing the need to a third party based on the combined requirements of all of the member districts.

Professional development

Users of technology require training on how to correctly and effectively use the tools they have been given. Providing the level of training and professional development staff need on an on-going basis is performed best at an SU level, where the needs of many individuals representing the member districts can be addressed collectively. The SU, as a collective body, can provide the professional development planning, evaluation, procurement of services, and implementation more effectively – both in terms

of human resources and cost – than individual schools or districts trying to do so independently.

Data administration / coordination

Schools and SUs are required to submit substantial amounts of data to the DOE several times throughout the year. Some data collections require input from both the SU and school level to complete. Often, data from individual schools are combined to paint a composite picture of an SU. And, schools within an SU likely share many of the same issues and challenges related to completing the data collections.

For these reasons and others, an effort to coordinate and manage all data within an SU and its member districts could prove to be beneficial to the member districts and to the overall quality of their data. The SU could work with all member schools to address challenges they face with various data collections. If most or all of the schools use the same student information system, a coordinated effort could be made to automate the completion of the student censuses, developing an export/import process to eliminate intensive manual inputting of data. Quality assurance procedures could be coordinated at the SU level to provide additional checks before submitting data to the State. And, a centralized coordinator could ensure that member districts and school submit data on time and correction of data errors are followed up on.

The best practices presented throughout this guide should be interpreted in light of the role of the SU as described here. For purposes of consistency and simplicity, the terms supervisory union and SU are used in this guide to refer both to supervisory unions consisting of multiple school districts and to those consisting of only one school district, also referred to as supervisory districts (16 VSA § 11).



Best Practices

The best practices presented in this Guide have been categorized somewhat for ease of reading. The first group of best practices contains general items that are overarching, applying to all or many of the State data collections. The next two groups are best practices relating to staffing issues and to professional development that, again, apply to all or many of the State data collections. Finally, best practices that are specific to certain of the State's core data collections are presented.

Hardware, software and IT services cannot be purchased just whenever funds become available. Technology must be a standard item in SU and district budgets, and the budgeted amounts must be realistic.

General

Put it on the calendar

SU and school staff who complete the State data collections often have multiple due dates and deadlines to meet throughout the school year. At times, these multiple deadlines coincide with each other and create periods where specific staff find themselves with seemingly more work to do than time available to do it. To anticipate such times, maintain an **Annual Calendar** of when State data collections are due, and plan to dedicate appropriate staff to the process at those times. Your SU or school probably already maintains a calendar for most events. Include in that calendar key dates for the State data collections, such as when the data collection instrument (Access application, Web page, etc.) will be available for use and when the data are due back to the State. Also include all staff that will be involved in each data collection and the anticipated level of work required by each.

What to do and how much will it cost?

Develop and maintain a **Technology Plan and Budget**. This is essential. Hardware, software and IT services cannot just be purchased whenever funds become available. Technology must be a standard item in SU and district budgets, and the budgeted amounts must be realistic. Computers and software become obsolete over time and there must be budgeted funds to pay for replacements. Further, new opportunities to use technology require that new hardware, software and services be purchased to support those opportunities.

Write it down

Develop and document **Data Collection Protocols and Procedures** for the State data collections. Specifically, the focus of these protocols and procedures would be on the front-end processes that collect and prepare the data, as well as the entry of these data into the State data collection systems. This documentation should address issues such as what events trigger the entry of a record into the student information system, what events trigger modification of data within each record, what events cause a record to close, and why you should or shouldn't delete those records. It would likely address the chain of communication for various data collections that would include school secretaries, registrars, guidance counselors and others, and how they interact with each other to report data. And, it would address issues such as what happens if parents refuse to provide the race/ethnicity (or other data required by the State) of their student.

Just a little peace and quiet

Too often, data are supplied by a school registrar or secretary who is in the school office, answering phone calls, signing hall passes, directing visitors, collecting money for lunch tickets, and so on. Data quality is important, and we expect these staff to enter data with a minimal amount of errors (or none), yet don't allow them to concentrate on their task, uninterrupted. If you want to have data entered accurately and in a timely manner, **provide an environment** where data entry personnel can focus the time and attention necessary to complete the State data collections. Ideally, this should be away from high-traffic, high-activity areas and free from constant interruptions.

Creating a work environment that allows staff to focus on the State data collections will most likely require arrangements to be made to complete the work that those individuals would normally be doing during that time.

Examples include:

- Hire a temp worker to fill in for the individual,
- Recruit volunteers to help out during that time, or
- Allow for paid overtime (or comp time) to complete the data collection outside of normal work hours.

Of course, a combination of the three may be the best approach to meet the unique situations (staffing, funding, and culture) of a particular school or SU.

Make sure it's right


Every data collection should have a **quality assurance process**. Don't let the data out of the door until they have gone through a review process. There's no way to guarantee that the data collected and sent to the State will be 100% correct, but a reasonable quality assurance process can go a long way in catching errors before they're reported.

There's no "one size fits all" process that will work for every data collection, but a few common practices do apply:

- Have the data reviewed by a second party after it has been submitted. This may be a review of school-entered data by SU staff. It could also be a principal reviewing data that have been entered by a registrar or secretary.
- Where possible, cross-check data against local data systems. For example, if you report incidents in the Combined Incident Report that involved students with IEPs, verify that those students are indeed in your special education child count database.
- Verify various statistics about the data if possible. For example, compare items such as frequency counts, minimum or maximum values, and average values to the same statistics from previous years. Or, simply review those types of statistics for "reasonableness", following up on anything that seems to be an anomaly.
- When the DOE sends confirmation or turnaround reports after data have been submitted, take the time to verify that those data are correct. If they are not, follow the data correction instructions provided by the DOE for the specific data collection.
- And, finally, if the data are published by the DOE after you submit them, verify that the published data are the same as what you thought you submitted. If not, contact the DOE helpdesk immediately. (See *Know where to go for help* on the following page.)

Keep it confidential!

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) regulates how student information can be shared. To comply with FERPA requirements, it is important to **always remember that student data are confidential and should not be disclosed to entities outside of the school district, supervisory union, or DOE**. Further, when sharing student information with legitimate consumers of that information, it is best not to utilize email. In general, email is not appropriate for transmitting sensitive or



confidential information unless an appropriate level of security matches its use for such purposes.

Accordingly, when debugging problems with third-party software, do not send your database to the software vendor if it contains actual student records. If your vendor suggests that you do so, remind them of your FERPA obligations and request an alternate means of resolving your software problem.

If you have not already done so, familiarize yourself with FERPA's regulations, so that you will be aware of your legal obligations under this act. For more information, visit the US Department of Education's website at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpc/ferpa/index.html>.

Know where to go for help

The DOE provides general helpdesk support for the State data collections at 802-828-3777. For more specific program-related assistance, the instructions for completing individual data collections usually include phone numbers for DOE staff who are knowledgeable in that particular program area (such as school finance or incidence reporting). Be sure to **take advantage of DOE support when you have problems**, rather than spending hours trying to resolve them on your own.

Know your role

Superintendents, principals, business managers, registrars and others all play distinctive roles in the various data collections. Sometimes these roles may change depending on the particular collection. **Understand your role for each data collection**, particularly if you're in a position of responsibility for approving the data as being correct. *Forum Guide to Building a Culture of Quality Data* provides a good guideline for understanding the various roles in a school or district. This guide, provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) can be found at: http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2005801.asp.

Staffing

There are several elements that must work together to successfully collect and report data. Certainly, the right technology makes the job easier. And following the proper rules and procedures can improve the accuracy of the data, as can an understanding of how and why the data are reported. However, in this high-tech age, perhaps the most important factor is not the technology itself, but the human element. Having the right organizational structure and the right people in that structure is critical to the process of collecting and reporting data to the State. Below are a few best practices that speak specifically to how staffing can enhance your SU or school's ability to complete the State data collections.

"In this high-tech age, perhaps the most important factor is not the technology itself, but the human element. Having the right organizational structure and the right people in that structure is critical to the process of collecting and reporting data to the State."

Put someone in charge

Designate a **State Data Collections Coordinator**. This is a staff person who has the overall responsibility of ensuring that the State data collections are completed on time, and that the data collected and submitted are accurate. Sometimes referred to a *data steward*, this individual would perform the following functions:


Data collections expert

The State Data Collections Coordinator should be the local expert on SU and school data collection practices as well as the State data collections. As a liaison between the SU/schools and the DOE, he or she should understand and be sensitive to the distinct perspectives of the DOE, SUs and schools with regard to the data collections. This person should be able to interpret and reconcile requirements, concerns and priorities between all entities, and be able to align local data collections with those of the DOE.

During those times when a data collection is being completed, the State Data Collections Coordinator must be free to focus his or her attention on that data collection. This person should be responsible for ensuring that the data collections are completed by the appropriate staff, and for ensuring data quality.

Data manager

The State Data Collections Coordinator should be able to use appropriate technology, including databases, spreadsheets and analysis tools, to manipulate data, crosswalk local code sets to state code sets, run data



quality checks and import/export data. This requires a skill set that goes beyond knowledge of the technology. It also requires the ability to delve into the data, perform *ad hoc* queries and discover what the data actual mean. It requires the ability to look at data and determine if they are reasonable or not. Finally, it requires the ability to grasp the relationship between data collected and maintained at the local level and data that are collected and reported to the State.

Training coordinator

The State Data Collections Coordinator should be aware of the training and professional development requirements for staff who complete State data collections. This includes State-hosted events that are specific to individual data collections, as well as training offerings for other technology skills. In addition, the State Data Collections Coordinator should personally participate in State training as needed to keep current with the data collections as well as appropriate training needed to maintain data management skills.

Protocols and procedures coordinator

The State Data Collections Coordinator should also be responsible for overseeing the development and documentation of data collection protocols. This documentation should address issues such as what events trigger the entry of a record into the student information system, what events trigger modification of data within each record, what events cause a record to close, and why you should or shouldn't delete those records. It would also likely address the chain of communication for various data collections that would include school secretaries, registrars, guidance counselors and others, and how they interact with each other to report data.

As you can see from the list above, the State Data Collections Coordinator should ideally possess skills in a variety of areas, including technology, data management, data analysis, organization and interpersonal communications. It's quite possible that the duties described above would only be a portion of this person's job description, but, when it's time to complete a particular collection, he or she must have focused time to accomplish that task.

It would be ideal to have a State Data Collections Coordinator at the SU level to oversee all data collections in the SU, even those that are completed by individual schools. School-level coordinators would work with the SU-level coordinator to facilitate both school-level collections and SU-level collections

"The technology required to collect, manage analyze and report data will not "just happen". There must be someone coordinating the assessment, acquisition and use of technology within an SU."

that rely on input from member schools. Used appropriately, a State Data Collections Coordinator filling the roles described here should significantly reduce the burden on SU and school staff when completing the State data collections.

Who's responsible for the technology?

Designate a dedicated **Technology Coordinator**. There needs to be an individual who is responsible for coordinating the assessment, acquisition and use of technology within an SU. The technology required to collect, manage, analyze and report data will not "just happen" without at least one person coordinating the technology in an SU. Even if you have technicians available to assist educators and administrators with software and technology, the lack of a technology coordinator severely limits the effectiveness of implementing technology needed to support the various initiatives in an SU. Don't have a wide area network (WAN) but want one? It'll be awfully hard to get there without a qualified, knowledgeable person planning and coordinating the process.

Support it

Finally, provide the **technical support** required to support your information technology. Computers, servers, networks and software are integrated pieces of your work environment, and will continue to play a progressively greater role in the future. The users of this technology require support – some on a daily basis and some less frequently. To keep all of your technology working, users need someone to call when there are problems.

Finding and paying computer technicians may require some creative thinking. Obviously, these resources may be hired SU or school staff whose sole job is to support technology. However, such an arrangement is not always feasible for a school or SU. A better approach may sometimes be to contract these services through an outside technology consulting firm. Or, consider training staff you already have for this function. Look for individuals who already show an affinity for technology and provide them with the training they need to be able to provide the technical support that you lack.

“Having the right people in your organization is still not enough to ensure that data are collected accurately and efficiently. Those staff must be given the training and professional development they need to develop the skills necessary to do their jobs.”

Professional Development

Having the right people in your organization is still not enough to ensure that data are collected accurately and efficiently. Those staff must be given the training and professional development they need to develop the skills necessary to do their jobs. To have a complete understanding of what it takes to collect and report accurate data, it is essential that staff involved in the State data collections develop their skills in the following areas:

- Basic office technology,
- DOE data collections,
- Purchased software packages, and
- Data analysis and administration.

Ideally, the State Data Collections Coordinator should be responsible for overseeing the training and professional development in an SU or, in the absence of a State Data Collections Coordinator, an SU-level training coordinator should fill that role.

Basic office technology

Proficiency with basic office technology is essential for all SU and school staff who are involved in completing the State data collections. Office productivity software (e.g., Microsoft Office), email, and Internet browsers are all examples of technology in which your office staff must be proficient. The State data collections rely on your staff effectively using Access, Excel and web-based applications to submit data to the State.

To meet this requirement, the following should be in place in your SU or school:

- Hiring requirements for new staff should include proficiency with the basic office technologies listed above.
- The SU and school should provide ongoing training and refresher courses for staff to keep their skills in these technologies current.

Spreadsheets! They’re not just for business managers!

Be certain that you don’t limit your office productivity software training to word processors (such as Word) and email. Proficiency with spreadsheets, such as Excel, can greatly increase productivity for staff working with certain data. Many SUs or schools manually perform data manipulations that could be automated by importing the data into a spreadsheet and using basic

functions. Calculating, sorting and summarizing can all be done in spreadsheet programs when you learn how to import data into them and then let the programs do the work for you.

For example, if your student information system will only report the number of session days and the number of absences for each student, you will need to calculate the number of attendance days yourself to complete the Spring Census. Don't use a calculator to subtract absences from session days to get each student's attendance days. Import your data into a spreadsheet and set up a column that will automatically do the arithmetic for you using a simple function. Now, if that didn't make sense, make sure you include yourself when you sign up staff for an "Introduction to Spreadsheets" class.

Who needs training for what?


Before you start sending staff to training, you need to determine who needs training for what. And, after you implement your training plan, you'll want to be able to evaluate how effective it is and to what extent the proficiency level of your staff is improving.

The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, through its Advanced Learning Technologies (ALTec) division, has developed ProfilerPro, a tool that you can use free of charge to evaluate the training needs of your staff. ProfilerPro is a comprehensive survey tool developed to meet the evaluation and knowledge management needs of K-16 educators in measuring the effects of technology adoption and integration into learning environments and the effects of comprehensive staff development programs. It allows for the evaluation of knowledge, attitude, and skill based on simple surveys implemented via the World Wide Web. ProfilerPro also maintains the ability for members of a group to share knowledge and promote collaboration based on responses to skills-based survey items.

For more information on how to use simple Web-based surveys to evaluate your staff's skills and the effectiveness of your training program, visit ProfilerPro's Website at: www.profilerpro.com.

DOE data collections

There seems to be a wide range among SUs and schools in the degree of understanding of how to correctly complete the various State data collections. New staff face a particularly daunting challenge in this area. But



it's not just the newbies that don't get it right. Veteran staffers often express confusion or misunderstanding about some of the data collections, as well. And, it's often these veterans who are training the rookies.

The DOE offers training for most of the core data collections on a regular basis. However, SUs and schools don't always take advantage of them and sometimes seem to be unaware that the opportunities exist.

Take advantage of training opportunities offered by the DOE for all new staff, and plan occasional refresher classes for the old pros. Make sure the attendees obtain the following from their classes (and, if they don't, let the DOE know how they can improve their training opportunities to meet these needs):

- Comprehensive instruction on how to install and use the software. This should include how to complete all entry screens in the application and how to determine what should be entered in each field.
- A review of frequently asked questions (FAQs) that are updated on a continual basis and the opportunity for attendees to present their own questions.
- A review of the reasons behind collecting the data. This may include discussions on State or Federal laws and regulations as well as explanations on how the data are used by the DOE.
- An opportunity for all class participants to share methods and procedures they employ to expedite the data collection processes at their SU or school. In some instances, this could include breakout sessions for users of the same local software, for example, student information systems, to discuss how they deal with extracting data from their systems and submitting it via the State data collection instruments.

Purchased application software (SIS, financials, SPED)

The use of purchased application software is prevalent in SUs and schools in Vermont. Most widely used are student information systems in schools and financial systems in SUs. However, staff are often not trained to use these products to their full potential. Consequently, you or your staff may be performing time-consuming tasks that could, and should, be automated by your application software (which you probably paid a lot of money for!).

Again, new staff are particularly in need of this training, as they were probably not around when the software was originally purchased and installed. Veteran software users are frequently not aware of advanced or new features, or have tunnel vision, knowing only the parts of the system that they have always used. And, they may know how to use the software as designed by the vendor, but have not exploited certain features or processes that would expedite the specific tasks required to complete the State data collections.

Protect your investment with training

Almost all software vendors provide training offerings for a fee. Some will come to your location (usually for a larger fee), while most provide regional locations for training events. Don't consider these opportunities to be optional or frivolous. You paid, and probably continue to pay, good money for your software. Make certain you and your staff are trained to take full advantage of its features and capabilities, and keep abreast of new functionality as it becomes available.

Birds of a feather... user groups

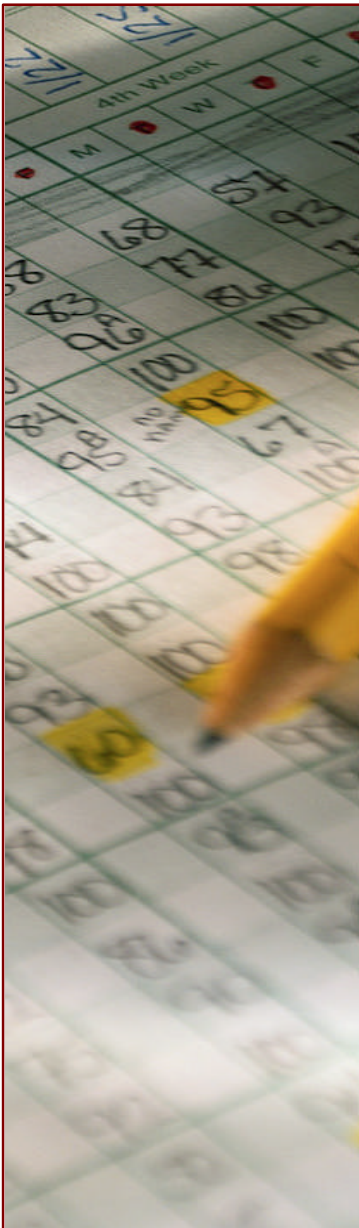
Many commercial software applications have regional user groups that meet to share ideas and discuss common problems, concerns and interests related to the use of their software. Take advantage of user groups comprised of Vermont SUs and schools to address issues related to the State data collections. Remember, all SUs and schools in Vermont share a common or similar set of requirements related to completing the data collections; the challenges you face are probably not unique to you. Learn how other schools and SUs who use the same software you use deal with these issues, and send a unified message to your software vendors to encourage them to assist in this effort through software modifications, additional product features and technical support.



Core Data Collections

The following best practices relate to specific State data collections. These practices have been recognized at various SUs and schools as enhancing the accuracy or efficiency of completing these data collections. Many, if not all, of these practices may be applicable to the situations you encounter at your SU or school.

Best practices for the following data collections will be discussed:



Student Censuses

Safe and Healthy Schools

Combined Incident Reporting

Annual Statistical Report

Budget Data Collections

Special Education Child Count

Educator Census

Teacher/Staff Survey

Student Censuses

What Is It?

Student Censuses refer to four data collections conducted by the Vermont DOE:

1. Public School Fall Census,
2. Public School Spring Census,
3. Independent School Fall Census, and
4. Tuitioned Students Fall Census

Staff from public schools provide the data for the public school censuses and staff from independent schools provide the data for the independent school census. SU staff use the tuitioned students census to report students enrolled in independent schools and out-of-state schools for whom one of their member districts pays tuition or an assessment.

This Guide will address the public school censuses only.

The public school student censuses are, simply, students enrolled in the Vermont educational system with a specific set of information about each student, and profile information about each local education agency (LEA). More specifically, the student censuses capture *enrollment instances* for Vermont students. For example, if a student attended three different schools in the course of a single school year, there would be three enrollment instances in that year's State census – one from each school. And, if that student left a school during the school year and returned later that same year, that student would have two separate enrollment instances for the same school in that year's census.

The process of collecting public school census data involves two general data collections: the Fall and Spring Censuses.

Fall Census

Completing the Public School Fall Census involves the following tasks:

- Verify all school profile information and update or revise where necessary.
- Verify the information for each student listed and update or revise where necessary.
- Add students who are enrolled and are not on the list.

- Provide the actual first day of classes and the projected end date of the school year.
- Provide the number of session days and part-time kindergarten sessions.
- Enter the dates that school was not in session during the first 40 days of school.
- Verify and update, if necessary, various data for each student.

A key use of the Public School Fall Census data is the calculation of average daily membership (ADM). ADM is used in determining equalized pupils and in the calculation of education spending per pupil and education property tax rates.

How is it collected?

The Fall Census is completed using one of two methods: Web-based entry or an Access application.

For those using Access, a database application is sent preloaded with the school's census information from the previous census. Certain assumptions are made to update some data elements with reasonable information. After the data have been updated and are correct, the Access application is used to create a data file on a diskette for submission to the DOE. Schools can also import data into the Access application, and they have the ability to export the data as a text, Excel or Access file.

There is also a Web-based application that can be used to submit the census data. The Web application provides the same functionality as the Access application, except that it does not currently have an import function.

The Fall Census Access application is delivered to schools, or made available on the Web, in October and is due back by November 15.

Spring Census

The Public School Spring Census is used by public schools to update and add to the information originally provided in the Public School Fall Census. As with the Fall Census, there are individual records for each enrollment instance for each student, and an organizational profile for the school.

Completing the Spring Census data collection involves the following tasks:

- Verify all school profile information and update or revise where necessary.
- Verify the information for each student listed and update or revise where necessary.
- Add students who enrolled during the school year and who are not on the list.
- Provide the actual end date of the school year and the projected begin and end dates of the summer session, if there is one.
- Enter the number of attendance days, excused absence days and unexcused absence days for each student.
- Enter next grade and begin date for next grade for each student.
- Identify any students who have exited.

Data from the Spring Census, along with data from the Fall Census and the Annual Statistical Report, are used to calculate the allowable tuition FTE, which is in turn used to calculate allowable tuition. Data from this census are also used to create the test labels for the following fall's State assessments.

How is it collected?

The Spring Census is completed using one of two methods: Web-based entry or an Access application. It is delivered to schools, or made available on the Web, in May and is due back by July 15.

Best Practices

Stop (re-)entering data!

The most common method currently used by schools to enter the Fall and Spring Censuses is to print a report – or reports – from the local student information system, and then go through the census application one student at a time, matching student records and verifying and updating individual student data. For schools of a hundred students, this is probably, at worst, an inconvenience. However, for larger schools, this process is extremely costly and time consuming, is especially prone to error, and has a negative impact on staff productivity and morale. In fact, the manual process for completing these two censuses probably accounts for the largest amount of time and effort expended for any of the State data collections.


The ideal alternative is to export data from your local student information system and either import the data into the DOE census or submit the data directly to the DOE. Such a process would eliminate the student-by-student

entry of census information and would address the negative aspects mentioned above. However, developing and implementing this process is easier said than done!

How do you get there? First, let's be upfront about the challenges. There's a good chance that your student information system doesn't use all of the same *code sets* that the DOE census uses. For example, the census uses six fields to determine a student's racial and ethnic background: five race fields that are "Y" or "N" (select all that apply) and a Hispanic ethnicity field that is "1" for Hispanic and "2" if not Hispanic. Your student information system, on the other hand, may collect this data differently. You may have only one field for race and ethnicity and your codes may be "WH" for white, "BK" for African American, "HS" for Hispanic, and so on. Similar situations may exist for other types of data as well, such as gender, exit codes and admission status. Consequently, there must be a way to convert the codes used in your student information system to those used in the census applications.

If that's not enough to contend with, consider the manner in which the census collects enrollment *instances* for each student. A student in your student information system may have left your school in November and returned in April. The Spring Census would require two enrollment instances for this student; in essence, this student would be in your Spring Census twice. The challenge here is that your student information system must store the enrollment information for that student in a manner that allows multiple enrollment instances to be created. And, even if your system supports multiple enrollment instances, if your school registrar simply went into the system and changed that student's enrollment information and status, instead of creating a new instance, you may still be left with only one entry for that student.

The challenge, then, is how to get all of this accomplished. There are at least three options, and the right answer may be a combination of all three. First, as mentioned earlier in this Guide, you should, ideally, have someone at your SU who has the technical ability to extract, translate and load data from your student information system into the DOE Access application. As described earlier, this person should be able to use appropriate technology to manipulate data, crosswalk local code sets to those used by the DOE, run data quality checks and import/export the data.



Next, consider joining other schools that use the same student information system that you use and working together to develop this process. Chances are, they face the same challenges you face and, by pooling your resources and expertise, you could develop a solution that you could all use, sharing the development expense.

Finally, look to your student information system vendor for help. If you have a system that is widely used in Vermont, your vendor has a lot of other customers just like you. And, if you don't have a system that is commonly used in Vermont, help your vendor recognize that if they can develop an automated export/import process for the State data collections, they'll have a great opportunity to lure customers away from the competition.


OK, but if you must do this the hard way...

Implementing an export/import process may be out of the question for your school or SU, even after considering the options above. You may not have the technical expertise or funding to develop the required software and procedures, or to even partner with other schools to develop them. If so, make sure that the manual procedures you are performing are as efficient as possible and that you are taking advantage of the software tools you have.

For example, to complete the Spring Census, you must enter both attendance and absence days, in addition to verifying basic student information described above. Your student information system should be able to produce a single report that lists all of the data you need to complete the Spring Census. If you can't get that from your system, find out how you can get it. Contact your software vendor, if necessary. It's quite likely that, if there is not a report available in your system that meets your needs, there is the ability to create a custom report that does so. And, again, if you are using a student information system that's used by other schools in Vermont, they have the same requirements that you have. Find out what they are doing and work together to get what you need.

Have we mentioned user groups?

Whether you use an export/import process to provide census data or manually enter and update data, your process for obtaining these data from your student information system will be somewhat common to all or most users of the same software throughout the state. As mentioned earlier in this Guide, regional user group meetings are extremely valuable places to meet other users who face the same challenges you face and use the same



software you use. Work with your counterparts from other districts to develop efficient processes for accessing the data you need for the student censuses. Jointly develop custom reports that can be shared by everyone that will make your job easier. Or, preferably, jointly develop an export/import process as described above. Remember to petition the vendor of your student information system as a group to get enhancements incorporated into the software itself to make your job easier and more efficient.

State ID vs. Local ID – Keep it local


The Vermont statewide student identifier is used to uniquely identify each public school student in Vermont. This capability allows certain student-level data, such as assessment performance and graduation status, to be tracked across all public school districts in the State. Every public school student in Vermont is required to have a state-assigned ID, and every local student information system should collect and store it.

However, even though it should be maintained as part of the local student's record, the state-assigned ID should not be used as the unique local student ID. One problem with using the state ID as the local ID involves the addition of new student records in the local student information system for students who do not yet have a state ID. This includes students transferring from a non-Vermont public school district and first time school enrollees, such as kindergartners. In those cases, a registrar would have to enter the students into the student information system with a temporary ID, request a new state ID from the DOE, and then change the student's local ID after the state ID is assigned. Complicating this process is the fact that some data systems do not allow a primary identifier to be changed, requiring instead that a new record be created with the new ID and the old record be deleted.

The state-assigned ID should be viewed as another *attribute* of the student, much the same as gender, birthdate or race/ethnicity. As such, the state ID could be changed on a student record without changing the student's primary ID in the local student information system. This could occur with new students, as described above, or when a student with an existing state ID is incorrectly assigned a new one.

Don't forget those procedures

As already mentioned, procedures for how to record student information should be documented and maintained. We've already discussed how



enrollment instance history can be lost if data are not properly entered into the student information system for a returning student. Likewise, other issues such as when to delete (or not delete) records, how to record exit codes correctly and what to do when data are incomplete should be addressed in writing in a procedures guide. Don't assume that everyone "just knows" how to handle these situations correctly.

Safe and Healthy Schools


What Is It?

The Safe and Healthy Schools data collection is used to collect information on a variety of issues centering on diverse aspects of student safety and health. All of these data are collected to comply with State and Federal reporting requirements, requirements of funding sources, or because the data are critical to the mission of the DOE. These include:

- Standardized reporting by each school to describe its substance abuse prevention program, as required by Vermont State Board of Education Section 4200 Rules on Alcohol and Drugs. Schools are required to have such a program by Act 51 (1983) (16 V.S.A. §909).
- Reporting on the progress of HIV/AIDS prevention efforts and the implementation of coordinated school health programs at the local level. This is required by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) so that the DOE can receive grant funding for the Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP). CSHP provides technical assistance, training and resources to schools to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Determining eligibility for Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community Act (SDFSCA) funding.
- Reporting to the Vermont Advisory Committee of the US Civil Rights Commission on efforts to provide safe, civil, orderly and positive learning environments for all students free from hazing, harassment and bullying.
- Assessing individual school compliance with Act 51, NCLBA, State Board Rule 4102 (Emergency Planning), and 16 V.S.A. §165 (a), (8) (Safe Schools School Quality Standard).

Specifically, the data are collected in the following areas:

- The school's policies (alcohol, tobacco, weapons, etc.)
- Intervention / Support and Referral System
- Curriculum programs offered and enrollment in each program (locally developed curriculum, life skills training, etc.)
- Health education curriculum
- Peer leadership programs (SADD, peer mentoring, etc.)
- Act 51 training
- Professional development needs
- Community involvement

- 
- Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (SDFSCA)
 - Restrictive behavioral intervention
 - School emergency management plan

How is it collected?

The Safe and Healthy School data are reported by school secretaries or guidance counselors using an Access application that is sent to schools in May. However, the data actually come from a variety of individuals at the school. The application can print data collection forms that can be given to multiple individuals, and then returned to a central person for data entry.

The application comes preloaded with information provided by the school the previous year. After all data have been entered and validated, the application is used to export the data to a diskette for submission to the DOE, due by July 1.

Best Practices

Ask the right people

The Access application is designed to get the right answers from the right people. Use the software to print out the individual forms, forward them to the right people for verification or changes, and, after the forms are returned, have a central coordinator enter the data into the Access application. Or, better yet, install the Access application on a network drive and allow the respective individuals to enter their updates directly into the application, emailing the coordinator when they're finished.

Combined Incident Reporting

What Is It?

The Combined Incident Report is used to collect information regarding incidents that occurred in each school and the resultant disciplinary actions. Incidents are recorded differently based on whether they are hazing and harassment incidents, incidents resulting in restrictive behavioral intervention, or all other incidents. All of the data gathered are required by law or federal granting agencies, or are critical to the DOE's mission. Statutory authority or funding agency requirements to collect data include the following:

Suspension and Expulsion Data

The Federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Community Act (SDFSCA) requires the DOE to annually collect the number of students who are suspended or expelled for possession of, or selling alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the DOE to gather suspension and expulsion data for students eligible for special education services.

Hazing and Harassment Data


16 V.S.A. §164 (17) requires the commissioner to report annually, on a school-by-school basis, the "number and types of complaints of harassment or hazing made pursuant to section 565 of this title and responses to the complaints."

Violent Crime and Weapon Data

The SDFSCA requires the DOE to gather data on school-related crimes, possession of, or use of a weapon.

Persistently Dangerous Schools Data

Under the provisions of the Unsafe School Choice Option of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), a student who attends a "persistently dangerous" school, or is the victim of a violent crime on school grounds, has the same choice options as are available to a student attending a "failing" school as determined by the accountability system. These data will be used to



determine whether a school meets the definition of being “persistently dangerous”.

Use of Physical Restraints and Seclusionary Timeout Practices

In response to growing concerns regarding the use of physical restraints, the commissioner convened a task force in 2002 to advise him on the need for policies, regulations or legislation. The task force completed its work and recommended that the commissioner continue to gather data and monitor the use of physical restraints rather than advocate for the passage of legislation. In January 2003, the commissioner released a model policy on the use of restrictive behavioral practices.

How is it collected?

The Combined Incident Report is reported by school secretaries or guidance counselors using an Access application, the Combined Incident Report Software (CIRS), provided by the DOE. After all data have been entered and validated, the application is used to export the data to a diskette for submission to the DOE. To maintain students' privacy, identifying information about offenders and victims, such as names, are not included when the export is performed.

CIRS is sent to schools at the beginning of the school year and is due on July 1.

Best Practices

Train early...

The DOE is making an effort to provide the CIRS software for the upcoming school year, and training on how to use the software, as early as possible, preferably during the summer months. By taking advantage of this training, your staff can be prepared to use the software from the start of the school year.

... Enter often

Having CIRS installed and ready to use at the start of the school year will allow your staff to enter incidents into CIRS throughout the school year as they occur. This will alleviate the backlog of data entry that has happened often in the past when staff have entered all of the incidents for an entire school year in May or June.

Details, details, details...

Chances are, your student information system, even if you have a Discipline Module, does not collect the level of detailed information needed for entry into CIRS. Use paper data collection forms to collect the initial data when the incident is processed by a discipline officer or planning room worker. CIRS provides the ability to print blank forms that contain all of the data required for hazing, harassment and bullying incidents, restrictive behavioral occurrences, and other incidents. If you capture as much information as you can up front using these or your own forms, data entry at a later time will be much faster and easier.

Ask the right people

The CIRS software requires student data that are recorded in other data systems or paper files. For example, CIRS requires that students with IEPs be identified as such and that their primary disability be specified. These data are required for reporting to the Office of Special Education Programs per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Unfortunately, that information is not always directly available to an individual who may be completing an incident form or entering the data into CIRS. To provide quality assurance for the reporting of incidents regarding students with IEPs, all incident reports should be routed to special education staff for verification of whether or not an offender has an IEP and, if so, entry of the appropriate disability. Likewise, race/ethnicity, birthdate and grade level should be verified by staff who have access to the student information system or student files.



Annual Statistical Report

What Is It?

The Annual Statistical Report is used to identify and report all revenues and expenditures for every school district, SU and technical center in Vermont. The DOE is required to collect financial data for a variety of purposes, such as computing allowable tuition. This information is also used to complete a variety of annual State and Federal surveys of general education statistics and trends.

The Annual Statistical Report is due, by law, on August 15, or the next business day if August 15 falls on a weekend.

The *Handbook for Financial Accounting for Vermont School Systems* defines the proper reporting of financial data. By law (16 VSA § 563), all school districts are required to establish a system of accounts and maintain financial records in a manner approved by the Auditor of Accounts and the Commissioner of Education. This provides a common, consistent means of collecting these data across all districts, supervisory unions and technical centers. The Handbook defines revenue, program, function and object codes to be used in this process. (For purposes of the Annual Statistical Report, the list of programs has been consolidated into eighteen categories.)

How is it collected?


The Annual Statistical Report is collected using a Visual Basic application that is sent to each reporting LEA. To facilitate this, the DOE provided laptop computers and printers to all business managers. The software has been fully tested on a laptop and printer configured identically to those machines. In most SUs, the Annual Statistical Report is completed by the central business office. There are locations, however, where it is completed by town clerks and forwarded to the SU office.

After all data have been entered and validated, the data are exported to a diskette for submission to the DOE.

Best Practices

Chart of accounts: Get on the same page!

One of the biggest challenges in completing the Annual Statistical Report is aligning the data you have in your local accounting system with the format



required by the DOE. A fundamental element of that process is to collect and process financial data in your accounting system using the same chart of accounts that the DOE uses. The more aligned your chart of accounts is with the DOE's, the easier it will be to report your financial data as required. That's going to require your accounting software to be flexible enough to support the DOE chart of accounts, and to provide rollups and breakdowns by various account code segments as required by the Annual Statistical Report.


We're not just talking about the SU here. If you're the business manager at the SU, you're responsible for the final submission of all of your member districts' Annual Statistical Reports to the State. If you have member districts using a chart of accounts that's different from the DOE's and the SU's, that's more work for you to reconcile the differences. A consistent chart of accounts throughout an entire SU makes reporting easier for the SU business manager, and reconciling easier for everyone.

Grade levels

Another challenge that many districts face is properly allocating expenditures by grade level: K-6, 7-8, 9-12 or districtwide. For districts that operate an elementary school only or a high school only, this process is fairly straight forward. For those that operate multiple schools, it involves allocating some expenditures between their schools. And, for districts that operate schools with grade levels different from those collected by the State – for example, a K-8 elementary school, a 6-8 middle school, or a 7-12 high school – it gets even more complicated.

The best way to handle these situations is to collect expenditure data by grade level in the local accounting system. Where an expenditure can be identified at the time of data entry as belonging in a distinct grade level, it should be initially entered as such. For others that are not distinct, the local accounting system should allocate expenditures to the appropriate grade levels based on ratios, such as the number of students in a grade level compared to the total number of students.

Unfortunately, the school accounting systems used in most districts in Vermont do not provide this functionality (at least, not intuitively). To handle these situations, the Annual Statistical Report software provides an allocation feature to allocate expenditures across grade levels. SUs who use this feature have reported that it saves them considerable time in allocating their



expenditures, especially those SUs that have schools or school districts that cross the grade levels defined by the State. The key is to make the software do the work for you. If you're not familiar with the allocation feature of the Annual Status Report, contact the DOE School Finance team for assistance in setting it up for your SU.

Import – don't re-enter

As with the student census data collections, the Annual Statistical Report requires that a significant amount of data that exist in a local data system be reentered into the DOE software. In the case of the Annual Statistical Report, this involves a spreadsheet-style application that contains thousands of cells. Manually entering these data is a process that is susceptible to data entry error and is extremely time consuming.


An ideal process would allow a business manager to simply export the data from the local accounting system and import them into the Annual Statistical Report software. This would require that you use the same chart of accounts locally as is used by the State. It would also be ideal if the local accounting system properly allocated expenditures by grade level, although this could still be accomplished in the Annual Statistical Report software by using the allocation feature.

As mentioned with the student censuses, implementing an export/import process is a significant challenge. The three options already mentioned to get this done bear repeating, remembering that the right approach may be a combination of all three:

1. Retain someone on staff who has the technical ability to extract, translate and load data from the accounting software into the Annual Statistical Report application.
2. Join with other schools who use the same accounting software that you use and work together to develop this process.
3. Ask your accounting software vendor for help.

Document what you do

Again, documenting the processes for completing the Annual Statistical Report is crucial. It's not good enough for these processes to be scattered about on Post-it® Notes or stored in your business manager's head. Even business managers get to retire someday, and what they do should be documented to ensure continuity of financial reporting should they not be



around. And, on a related note, cross-train as much as possible so that there is more than one person who knows and can perform these functions.

One more time: User Groups!

We've said it a couple times already, but here we go again: many of the issues you face regarding the Annual Statistical report are common to all or most users of the same accounting software throughout the state. As mentioned earlier in this Guide, use user group meetings to meet other business managers who face the same challenges you face and use the same software you use. Work with your counterparts from other SUs to develop efficient procedures for collecting and preparing the data you need to complete the Annual Statistical Report. Jointly develop custom reports to make your job easier and can be shared by everyone. Or, preferably, jointly develop an export/import process to take data from your accounting system and upload it to the Annual Statistical Report. Get the vendor of your accounting software involved and use your user group to have enhancements incorporated into the software itself to make your job easier and more efficient.

Budget Data Collections

What Is It?

Each town school district is required to submit a budget every June 1 for the upcoming school year. Additionally, there is a preliminary budget that is submitted at the end of January that provides a look at what each district is expecting to submit in June. The preliminary budget does not contain the same level of detail as the June budget.

Preliminary Budget

The preliminary budget is submitted to the DOE after it has been approved by the school board. If the budget has not been approved by the end of January, it is requested that it be submitted as soon as possible after obtaining school board approval.

The preliminary budget is an early indicator of what revenue and spending may look like for the next fiscal year and is useful for planning purposes at the State level. Among other things, it is used to develop estimates of districts' property tax rates for the coming year.

The preliminary budget captures the following high-level budget data:

- Proposed budget expenditures
- Eligible principal and interest for Capital Debt Hold Harmless aid
- Proposed budget revenues
- Estimated revenues offsetting capital debt
- Act 144 items:
 - Proposed Act 144 construction and debt service expenditures
 - Proposed Act 144 property tax revenues
 - Other revenues paying for Act 144 expenditures
- Approved capital construction spending, including principal and interest

How is it collected?

The preliminary budget is collected using a Web-based application. Prior year information is included to compare with the new budget.

June Budget

The June budget is submitted to the DOE for the purpose of calculating Education Spending (as defined in 16 VSA § 4001 (6)) for each town school district. It is typically prepared by business managers (and their staff) in SU offices for each of the SU's member districts, although it is occasionally prepared by town treasurers or district business managers. The data collection contains all anticipated general fund education expenditures and capital fund project expenditures, and anticipated revenues that will be used to pay for those expenditures. The June budget captures expenditure estimates by function code and fund code, and revenue estimates by revenue code and fund code.

The June budget is submitted after it has been approved by voters and a thirty-day reconsideration period has passed. Accordingly, budgets approved by voters on or before May 1 are due June 1. District budgets approved after May 1 are due 10 days after the end of the 30-day reconsideration period.

How is it collected?

The June budget is reported using a Web-based application.

Best Practices

Chart of Accounts

There is no question that the closer your chart of accounts is to the chart of accounts used by the DOE, the easier it is to report your data as required. Further, if all member districts in an SU use the same chart of accounts, it is easier to report them than if there are multiple charts of accounts within an SU.

Print it out

As described above, both budgets are collected using Web-based applications. To enter data into these applications, it is best to be able to print out the required budget data in the same format as they are entered on the Web. This means that your accounting software should be able to print a report for each budget submission that rolls up the data to the proper level of aggregation, using the same categories. You should not have to use a calculator and pencil when entering these data. This may require the development of a custom report to provide the proper formatting, but it should simplify the process of reconciling your budget submissions.

Special Education Child Count

What Is It?

The Special Education Child Count data collection is designed to collect data on students receiving special education and related services to satisfy reporting requirements from the US Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and Vermont state requirements.

Special education child count information is provided by supervisory unions for all of their member schools. The data provided includes basic demographic information about each student and information concerning their disability(ies).

The child count is used to provide data to OSEP per Section 618 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Child count represents a snapshot of the data as of December 1. These data also include exit status of any student who exited special education in the previous twelve months.

How is it collected?


These data are primarily provided to the DOE via an Access application. The application is sent to the supervisory unions in October and the data are due back by mid-December. After all of the data have been entered or updated, the application creates a diskette that is sent to the DOE.

In February or March, after the data have been verified and processed by the DOE, two copies of the application are sent back to the SUs: one that is a read-only version, and one that can be used to maintain the student data as they change. In the time period from mid-December until the application is returned, the child count application cannot be used to enter data.

Best Practices

Again... Don't (re-)enter those data!

As with the Student Censuses, the ideal best practice is to export your child count data from your special education student database and either import it into the DOE Child Count application, or, even better, send it directly to the



DOE. There are special education software solutions available that can perform these functions for you. Regardless of which system you choose, use the import functionality of the child count application instead of reentering your data.

If you don't have your own special education student database, you can use the Access application from the DOE to track the basic information that is required to be reported to the State. Remember, however, that you will not be able to update data in the child count application during the data verification period from mid-December until February-March.

Educator Census

What Is It?

The Educator Census is used to collect information on educators and courses from schools. The three primary purposes for this collection are:

1. to gather data on educator assignments in order to determine which classes are taught by “highly qualified teachers” in accordance with NCLB,
2. to provide schools, school districts and other stakeholders with detailed information on educator assignments, tenure and course offerings to enhance planning and policymaking, and
3. to project areas of teacher and administrator shortage as per the DOE/SBE Strategic Plan.

Anyone in a position requiring an educator license who was employed by the reporting district at any time during the school year is reported in this data collection, including outside contractors. This includes teachers, administrators, and student support personnel. Paraprofessionals, administrative assistants, and other personnel who do not require an educator license for their position (e.g. janitors and food service employees) are not reported.

Specifically, the data are collected in two areas: course information and educator information.

Course Information

This section collects information on every course taught by place of service (typically, a school or technical center). The data include a course name and a course category (art, business education, etc.).

Educator Information

This section collects information for each licensed employee by employing organization and place of service. K-12 and Technical Center teachers are associated with the specific course(s) they teach.

The Educator Census is sent to schools in January and the data are due back at the DOE in March.

How is it collected?

The Educator Census is collected using an Access application. The DOE provides the application to SUs with data preloaded from the previous year's data collection.

The Educator Census data are maintained centrally by the SU. However, the data actually come from each individual school in the SU. The DOE Access application is used to print three reports: Educators by Employing Organization, Courses Taught at Individual Schools, and Educators with Associated Courses. These reports are distributed to the principals of each school along with blank educator information forms and principals' directions. The principals manually update or correct information on the reports and use the blank forms to report new educators. The information is then sent back to the SU for data entry.

After all data have been entered and validated, the application is used to export the data to a diskette for submission to the DOE, along with a signed statement from the superintendent.

Best Practices


First things first

Completing this information in the proper order helps the process go considerably smoother. Specifically, any new educators hired by the SU, but providing services in schools, should be entered by the SU before sending the reports to the schools. Schools are responsible for providing the course information for these teachers, but are not responsible for providing the education information, since they are employed by the SU. Having these educators entered into the system ahead of time will result in less confusion over how to process them when the schools get their reports.

Who's responsible for what?

This data collection is a bit complicated because it involves data originating with the SU and data originating with schools, or member districts. Let's review who's responsible for what:

Educator Information – These data should be supplied by the *employing organization*. If an educator is employed by the SU, the SU should complete this information, regardless of where he or she provides services.



Information for educators employed by schools or school districts should be provided by school or school district staff.

Course Information – These data should be provided by *each school* to reflect the courses taught at their respective location.

Role and Courses Taught – These data should be provided by *each school* to reflect the roles, FTE and courses taught for each educator at the school. To report these data, the educator must have been identified by his or her employing organization which may or may not be the school. Any courses that this educator teaches must also have been identified so that they can be associated with the educator.

What has changed?

Since this data collection comes pre-filled with the data that were collected in the previous year, the only updates that should need to be made are those that reflect changes from the previous year. A process to identify those changes would speed up the completion of this data collection considerably. Specifically, the SU or schools' human resources application(s) should be able to create a report showing new hires since last year and one showing educators who have left since then. This would provide the information needed to add new educators and terminate departed ones, while providing a data quality check to make certain none were missed.

In addition, a report or reports showing any other changes – status, name (e.g. from a maiden name to a married name), or courses taught – would speed up the process of identifying changes and, again, provide a data quality check.

This functionality requires an HR system that is capable of identifying changes annually. If you have a commercial HR software product, work with your vendor to make your system work for you. If you have a “home grown” system, explore how you can use it to identify changes. And, if you don't use an HR system at all, consider using a spreadsheet or database application to collect all educator information in a manner that you can easily identify changes to that information when it comes time to complete this data collection.

Teacher/Staff Survey

What Is It?

The Teacher/Staff Survey is used to collect the full-time equivalent (FTE) count of all staff employed by each school and SU and their corresponding salaries, benefits and/or cost of contracted services. These data are used to calculate average salaries in Vermont, and are reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and to the Vermont School Boards Association.

Teacher/Staff Survey data are reported by category, which is grouped by function. Examples of function include: Function 1000 Direct Instructional Services, Function 2100 Support Services – Students, Function 3100 Food, etc. Examples of categories within those functions include (respectively): Kindergarten Teachers, School Registrars and Food Service Staff.

FTE counts are disaggregated by gender.

The Teacher/Staff Survey represents staffing data as of October 1, and is to be returned to the DOE by mid-October.

How is it collected?

The Teacher/Staff Survey is collected via a Web-based application. The data are entered by SU staff.

Best Practices

Here's the challenge in completing the Teacher/Staff Survey data collection: all of these data likely come from different data systems. Total amounts for Salary, Benefits and Contracted Services by function code should be available in the SU accounting system. However, those data may not be available broken down by staff category, and will definitely not include FTE data disaggregated by gender.

The SU payroll system may have salary and benefits data by individual employee, but may not provide a breakdown by function code or staff category, and most likely will not have gender. And, there is an even greater challenge when payroll and benefits are not handled through the SU, but decentralized to the member school districts.

Who's responsible for what?

As with the Educator Census, this data collection is completed by SU staff, yet involves data originating both with the SU and with schools, or member districts. Let's review who's responsible for what:

FTE by Gender and Category – FTEs should be provided by the employing organization. Schools should know the FTEs of the staff they employ, as should SUs. While some SUs may know that a school employee is full-time or part-time, and may even know their overall FTE with that school, they may not know employees' breakdown by staff category. Ideally, this information should be maintained at the SU, with schools responsible for communicating any changes to, or confirming the accuracy of, the previous year's data. Likewise, unless contained in an SU-level HR system, the employing organization should also provide the gender for each employee.

Function – The SU payroll system should contain the correct function code for each paid employee. If employing organizations report the appropriate staff category, as mentioned above, the SU payroll staff – presumably in the business office – should verify that the correct function code is being used based on that category.

Salary – Salary information should be provided by SU payroll or business office staff.

Benefits – Benefits information is most likely provided by the SU. However, there are some LEAs where benefits are administered by the town districts. In those instances, the SU must validate this information with the town district bookkeepers or business office staff.

Contracted Services – Contracts are most likely administered by the SU. However, staff categories must be verified with the employing organization. Also, there may be LEAs where at least some contracted services are administered at the town district level. In those instances, the SU must validate this information with the town district bookkeepers or business office staff.

Align payroll, accounting and HR

The ideal solution would be to align all sources of this information with each other. For example, make certain that the payroll process uses the proper chart of accounts to align with the function codes from the accounting system. Gender could be obtained by aligning with an HR system (if it collects gender), or identifying a custom field in your payroll system to record this attribute.

Some SUs have found that maintaining a separate database or spreadsheet with individual teacher/staff records is the best way to keep these data in the format required by the State. If your SU uses an automated payroll system, you should start with an export from that system that would include salary and benefits information.

Most likely, you won't have gender in the payroll system, so assigning the proper entry for each individual would be a manual process.

The next step would be validating the fund code for each employee. Ideally, the payroll system should be using the appropriate fund codes so that it can feed that data into the accounting system for eventual entry into the Annual Statistical Report. What will likely be missing is the staff category. This will have to be assigned for each employee.

Let your spreadsheet do the math

This is all fine and good for staff that fill one staff category. However, there may be staff that fill multiple roles, falling under different staff categories. These staff will require multiple entries in your database or spreadsheet. For these, create a column in your spreadsheet to enter the full-time equivalent (FTE) for each position, a total FTE for that employee, and two other columns that prorate their salary and benefits based on FTE for the position and total FTE.

For example, if a teacher has an FTE of 0.6 as an elementary teacher and 0.4 as an assistant principal, there should be two records in your spreadsheet, one for each position. Total FTE is 1.0, so salary and benefits for each position would be multiplied by $(0.6/1.0)$ and $(0.4/1.0)$ respectively. If a part-time teacher has an FTE of 0.3 as an elementary teacher and 0.2 as an athletic director, there should again be two records in your spreadsheet, one for each position. Total FTE is 0.5, so salary and benefits for each position would be multiplied by $(0.3/0.5)$ and $(0.2/0.5)$ respectively.

In the example below, Fred Jones is a full-time employee whose FTE as an elementary teacher is 0.6, and as an assistant principal is 0.4. George Smith is a part-time employee at the same school whose total FTE is 0.5, with 0.3 as an elementary teacher and 0.2 as athletic director.

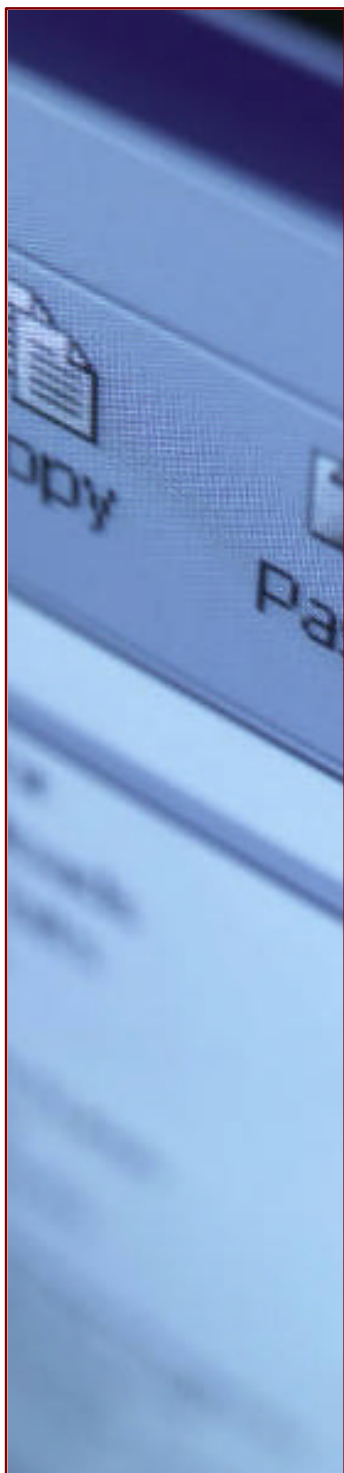
The numbers in the Total Sal and Total Ben columns came from the payroll and HR systems. The Salary column is calculated as $(\text{FTE} / \text{Total FTE}) * \text{Total Sal}$; the Benefits column is calculated as $(\text{FTE} / \text{Total FTE}) * \text{Total Ben}$.

Of course, this sample spreadsheet does not include all of the columns that would be needed, such as gender and function code.

Sample Spreadsheet

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
1	Last	First	Staff Category	Total Sal	Total Ben	Total FTE	FTE	Salary	Benefits	
2	Jones	Fred	Elementary Teacher	42600	14060	1.0	0.6	25560	8436	
3	Jones	Fred	Assistant Principal	42600	14060	1.0	0.4	17040	5624	
4	Smith	George	Elementary Teacher	26500	8500	0.5	0.3	15900	5100	
5	Smith	George	Athletic Director	26500	8500	0.5	0.2	10600	3400	
6	Anders	Connie	Principal	46500	15000	1.0	1.0	46500	15000	

Selecting Software Solutions



A key factor influencing how easy or difficult it is to complete the State data collections, and how accurately you do so, rests with the technology you use to collect and manage those data at the local level. The right software package can make it easy to extract data to send to the DOE, or it can present barriers that require considerable effort and resources to circumvent.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has published a useful guide, *Technology @ Your Fingertips: A Guide to Implementing Technology Solutions for Education Agencies and Institutions*, that describes a process for getting the best possible technology solution for your organization. This handbook, available via the Web at

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98293>,

describes the steps necessary to identify technology needs, acquire the technology, and implement a technology solution that will provide a foundation for your organization's future technology wellbeing.

As a Vermont SU or school, your organization faces unique data and software requirements that go beyond the general guidelines addressed in *Technology @ Your Fingertips*. This chapter addresses some of those “uniquely Vermont” issues. Specifically, it presents functionality you should look for when selecting a new student information system or financial/accounting software for your organization.

Ask:

- Is your product designed specifically for schools and school districts?
- Is your product currently in use in other schools, school districts or SUs in Vermont?

Student Information Systems

Most student information systems generally provide many of the same basic features. These include:

- Student demographics,
- Attendance tracking,
- Grading,
- Report cards and transcripts,
- Student behavior/conduct/discipline, and
- Basic reporting.

In addition, vendors offer a variety of features, usually as add-on modules, including:

- Class scheduling,
- Health,
- *Ad hoc* query and advanced reporting,
- Facilities management,
- Lunchroom, and
- A variety of Web features, such as
 - School home page/portal,
 - Class schedules,
 - Homework assignments, and
 - Teachers' grade books.

When you evaluate student information systems, you certainly need to evaluate features such as these and determine how well the software satisfies your unique requirements for each feature. In addition, there are several features that you should look for that are unique to the way in which data are reported in Vermont via the State data collections.

Code sets

Any student information system is going to utilize a variety of codes to signify various attributes of students or their status. For example, a student's gender may display on a screen as being "male" or "female", but internal to the system, it is probably represented by some sort of code – perhaps an "M" or "F", or a "0" or "1". A student information system may use dozens of codes, or code sets, to represent various data values. Other examples of these code sets include:

- Admission status,

- Entry/reentry type,
- Source of funding,
- Exit type, and
- Race and ethnicity.

It is important to remember that when it's time to report student data to the State, such as through the Fall Census, you will have to correlate the codes used in your student information system to the codes expected by the Fall Census software. The closer your student information system's code sets are to those used by the DOE software, the easier it will be to complete the State data collections.


You need to first make certain that the software being evaluated can collect these data elements, and then determine if the codes used in those fields can match the codes collected in Vermont. For example, one possible admission status for Vermont students is "Act 150 Student". A student information system should be able to record this status for a student, as well as any other admission status that may be unique to Vermont.

Another example is race and ethnicity. The student census data collections request that schools "select all that apply" when signifying a student's racial and ethnic background. A student information system should support the same categories used in the census collections, and allow the selection of multiple categories as applicable.

Further requirements for a student information system and the use of specific code sets can be found in the instructions for the Vermont School Register. This document describes the Yellow Pages, which serve as the public record for a school, and the Daily Record of Attendance, or A & B Pages, which provides the format for the enrollment record and the attendance record. Included in the documentation are a description of the required Register content and various codes that must be used.

Multiple enrollment instances

The DOE collects information on student enrollment *instances* in the Fall and Spring Censuses. This means that if a student transfers to a new school, and then transfers back to his or her original school in the same school year, that student would have three records in the State's census data collection –



the original school would report two enrollment instances and the second school would report one.

When evaluating a new student information system, it is important that you determine the software's ability to collect and report enrollment and attendance data in this manner. When a student leaves a school and later returns, you must have the ability to identify and report that situation as two separate enrollments, not as a single student record.

Export to the student census

The completion of both the Fall and Spring Census requires data to be entered or updated for every student in a school. Completing these censuses manually is extremely time consuming and prone to error. A student information system should be capable of exporting student data in a format that can be imported into the DOE student census software easily, with a minimal amount of data manipulation.

To support such an export/import process, the issues mentioned above – code sets and multiple enrollment instances – must be addressed. In addition, the student information system must be capable of storing every data element required by the census software.

The software vendor will probably need to be convinced that providing this functionality in their product will make it marketable to other schools throughout Vermont. If the vendor does not currently supply this capability, consider working with them to develop and beta test it, perhaps negotiating some sort of pricing or licensing concessions in return.

The “big picture”

We've talked earlier in this guide about the role of the SU in regard to the State data collections. When looking at a student information system, look for software that can provide SU-wide access to student data. Being able to look at all schools within an SU offers the ability to streamline data processes that would otherwise require individual requests using separate, unattached systems. SU-level access will better equip the SU to provide assistance and support for all of its member districts and schools.

In addition, Vermont Statutes require the superintendent to "examine the register of each school" and to "verify that the register is accurate" (16 V.S.A.

§1324). A student information system that provides SU-wide functionality would simplify and expedite this process for superintendents.

Ask:

- Can your software collect all of the data elements required by the State data collections?
- Can your code sets be aligned with those used by the VT DOE?
- Does your system satisfy the requirements for the Vermont School Register?
- Can your product record multiple enrollment instances per student within a school year?
- Can you provide a process to export student data from your product and import it into the State censuses?
- Do you provide an SU-level or district-level product?

Financial Software

As with student information systems, most commercial school district and SU financial software tends to provide the same basic features. These include:

- Fund accounting,
- General ledger,
- Budget preparation,
- Purchase orders / accounts payable,
- Flexible account codes, and
- Basic reporting.

Optional modules usually include:

- Payroll,
- Human resources,
- Accounts receivables,
- Remote entry (e.g., PO's),
- Assets management, and
- Advanced reporting and financial analysis features.

The following are features that are specifically pertinent to your requirements for reporting financial data to the State via various DOE data collections.

Chart of accounts

A best practice for collecting and reporting financial data to the State is to use the same chart of accounts at the local level as is used by the State. This requires that the accounting software used at the district or SU level be capable of using the State's chart of accounts and be able to aggregate and disaggregate data by various account code segments. A flexible account code structure should allow this to happen, and it should be both easy to set up and easy to modify when changes are made at the DOE.

Allocation by grade level

The Annual Statistical Report requires that expenditures be reported not only by function, object and program, but also by grade level: K-6, 7-8, 9-12, or districtwide. The most efficient way to do this is to collect the data in this manner in the local accounting system. This would require a method of allocating expenditure across grade levels at times when appropriate. For example, a teacher who teaches both high school and middle school classes would have his or her payroll and benefits allocated between two different

grade levels (or three, if the middle school classes include other grades in addition to 7 and 8). You need to make certain you understand if and how a vendor would provide this functionality in their accounting software.

Budget development

Two budgets are submitted to the DOE annually for each school district: the Preliminary Budget and the June Budget. Both are submitted via a Web-based application. To support these budget submissions, a district accounting system should be capable of first developing the budget using the chart of accounts required by the DOE, and then presenting the budget, such as via a printed report, in a format from which the data can be input into the DOE Web applications.

Export to the Annual Statistical Report

The completion of the Annual Statistical Report requires a significant amount of data to be entered manually into a spreadsheet-style application from the DOE. Once all of the data are entered, they must be reconciled back to the local accounting system to verify their accuracy. This process is very time consuming and susceptible to data entry error.

An ideal alternative would be to export data from the local accounting system and import them into the Annual Statistical Report Software. If a vendor will work with you to supply this functionality, it will save a tremendous amount of time annually for your business office staff when preparing the Annual Statistical Report.

Integrated payroll and human resources

In addition to the budgets and the Annual Statistical Report, the Teacher / Staff Survey is another State data collection that can be completed more easily if the right software is in place at the local level. Specifically, if your vendor can supply payroll and human resources modules integrated with the financial system, the Teacher/Staff Survey could be completed by gathering data from one source.

The Teacher/Staff Survey requires the reporting of payroll and benefit information for staff and certain contracted services. It requires that the data be reported by school and function code, and further broken down by staff category. FTEs are then disaggregated by gender within each staff category.

The best way to capture all of these data is with an integrated financial/ payroll/human resources system. Make your vendor aware of your needs for reporting these data and evaluate how their solution can satisfy those needs.

Ask:

- Can your software use the same chart of accounts required by the VT DOE?
- How does your product support the process of allocating expenditures across different grade-level groupings (e.g., a K-8 school whose expenditures must be reported by K-6 and 7-8 groupings)?
- Can your product create budget reports that presents data in a manner that can easily be input into the DOE Web-based budget applications?
- Can you provide a process to export data from your product and import it into the Vermont Annual Statistical Report?
- Do you offer integrated payroll and human resources modules to support the Teacher/Staff Survey?